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# Civil Society and Youth Engagement in the Western Balkans

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## Quick Summary

- Civic education – Civic education is not integrated in the education systems in the countries of the Western Balkans and it is not explicitly mentioned in their youth policy frameworks. Young people lack information on what civic engagement is and on participation opportunities.
- Youth legal framework – the youth legal and policy framework is an under-regulated area in the countries of the Western Balkans. No efficient mechanisms for integration of youth perspectives into public policy can be identified, and current legal and policy frameworks do not encourage youth participation and activism.
- Volunteering – lack of conducive environment in the region for volunteering. Volunteering is not sufficiently promoted among the youth, resulting in lack of information about volunteering opportunities in and outside the home countries. The lack of volunteering environment is also affected by poor institutional, legal and policy frameworks in the region. Constructive dialogue between CSOs and governments – insufficiently developed relations and cooperation between governments and CSOs for reforms and general decision making processes. There is still lack of involvement of CSOs, deriving from the lack of acknowledgment of the CSO sector as an important state actor.
- Shrinking civic space – Issues in and limitation of space for civil society to speak out and to act in promoting democratic values and the importance of civic participation of citizens but also to influence political and social structures. Non-supportive environment from governmental bodies.
- Financial sustainability and continuous access to funding – CSOs in the region are faced with limited tax incentives and insufficient state funding. The state funding distribution is still not in line with transparency and accountability standards that allow for easy, equal, fair and effective access for CSOs.
- The recommendations will be focused on finding solutions in overcoming the issues explained and on promoting regional reconciliation, especially among the youth because of the fact that they represent the future decision makers in the region. The policy brief, along with explaining the issues, will offer such recommendations to Western Balkans, EU and member states decision makers which will explore the possible ways of financial support by the EU and member states, transparent and inclusive meetings between the EU and the countries/CSOs and governments and youth, as well as the reform of legal and policy frameworks.

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### Relevance to Regional Reconciliation:

In view of the significance of regional reconciliation, recommendations are given towards incentivizing cooperation between both decision makers and CSOs, starting from a national, to a regional, and to an international level. Such cooperation, which is currently lacking, would lead not only to improvement of existing policies, but would also benefit the citizens. By providing civic education to citizens, starting from a young age, they become aware of their rights and duties, realizing the importance of leaving past disputes behind and focusing towards a shared future, which promotes and creates reconciliation. Financially supporting CSOs and creating an adequate environment for them to work, plays a significant role in this process. By having the needed means and funds, CSOs are able to make a significant contribution to enable citizen education, foster people to people contacts, and thus assist the governments, in the reconciliation process.

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## **List of Think-tanks and Organizations whose Research and/or Field Reports were used for the Preparation of this Document:**

1. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Hercegovina
2. Local Democracy Agencies (LDA), Western Balkans
3. National Youth Council of Republic of Macedonia, Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia
4. Children's Human Rights Center of Albania, Tirana, Albania
5. Center for Civic Education, Podgorica, Montenegro
6. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and SeConS development initiative group, Belgrade, Serbia
7. Ana and Vlade Divac Foundation, Belgrade, Serbia
8. Prism Research, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Hercegovina
9. European Network of Political Foundations, Brussels, Belgium
10. Balkans Civil Society Development Network, Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia
11. Macedonian Center for International Cooperation (MCIC), Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia

## **Background to the Topic:**

The Western Balkan countries have a shared history and shared common traditions in policy and society development. The development and implementation of laws, strategies and policies after the 1990 took various forms, but for the most part created to comply with those of the European Union. The turbulent past decade of the Western Balkans has shown the will and preparedness of its countries to become members of the European Union, hence the reforms and law alignments that they have been undertaking for more than a decade. The launch of the Berlin Process, to maintain stability in the region and contribute in cooperation among the WB countries resulted in launching several economic, social and political initiatives, platforms and organizations such as the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO); Western Balkans Fund (WBF). Although civil society and the youth are one of the pillars of democracy and one of the main actors in addressing important reforms and issues in the EU accession processes, they still face issues, that will be explained in this policy brief and do not provide sufficient progress in the somewhat still marginalized societies of the Western Balkans.

## **Key Issues**

The aim of this document is to stress some of the key issues that the Western Balkans<sup>1</sup> faces in regard to the topic of civil society and youth engagement:

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<sup>1</sup> The term "Western Balkans" will be used to refer to the region and the term "Countries of the Western Balkans" will be used to refer to an asset or issue that applies for the countries within the Western Balkans.

## **Issue 1:**

### **Civic Education**

In most of the research studies consulted<sup>2</sup>, civic education in education system is not examined in depth but is rather given, in most recommendations, as a step to further improve civic participation and youth activism. The educational system across the countries of the Western Balkans is traditionally more focused on mere regurgitating and memorizing facts, instead of development of creativity and critical thinking.<sup>3</sup> Even when reforms regarding the education system do take place in the countries of the Western Balkans, they are mainly done by the government alone, without input from young people or the consultations of student councils or young activists and real consideration of the opinions and feedback acquired at these consultations.<sup>4</sup> Considering that the education system should be tailored to the needs of the youth, excluding young people from consultations on reform processes is a deprivation of and limitation of youth participation and thus contributes to the lack of motivation of young people to be active participants in national societies. During their inclusion in the education system, young people are rarely exposed to compulsory courses on civic education, which contributes to lack of activity and distrust in the importance and key role young people can have in social changes in democratic countries. The stressful environment in schools is another feature of the education system in the countries of the Western Balkans. This trend prevails also in higher education, where there tends to be a very stressful environment requiring the students to devote a great amount of time to studying, in comparison to their peers in more developed countries.<sup>5</sup> Also, as perceived, students in less developed countries tend to study more to a large extent because of the lower quality of their education system.<sup>6</sup> But this still does not make them fully prepared for the labour market nor to be fully aware of their role as active citizens and their opportunities to participate in a variety of civic activities, as civic education tends to be lacking as a course or program in education.<sup>7</sup>

## **Issue 2:**

### **Youth Legal Framework**

Looking at the legal and policy frameworks of six Western Balkans countries, it is quite evident there is no consensus on the definition of "youth". Youth is mainly defined via age, and moves between the ages of 15 or 16 and the ages of 29 or 30.<sup>8</sup> As far as mechanisms for active youth participation are concerned, stakeholders in the region seem to use several of them including laws on youth, youth councils, youth unions and youth strategies. In spite of having these mechanisms, as stated by stakeholders themselves, most of them are created *pro forma*; they are not fully active or functional; most mechanisms that are governmental bodies or municipal councils lack professional capacities and financial resources or present politicization of bodies that work with youth.<sup>9</sup> Many national strategies are developed according to EU legislation and youth policies, but they lack the "national" or "regional" element, and so most of strategies do not comply with the needs of youth, be that at national or at local level. Although each of the countries has legislation governing the collection of data, there is lack of systematically collected data on youth, which could be used towards designing

<sup>2</sup> The research studies consulted for this policy brief can be found on the bibliography.

<sup>3</sup> Knežević, M., Đukanović, P., "Youth – Social Ornament or Social Capital?"

<sup>4</sup> Berisha, F., Shtraza, I., Hazizaj, A., "Pjesëmarrja e Të Rinjve Në Politikë Dhe Në Vendim-Marrje Në Shqipëri (Youth Participation in Politics, and Decision-Making in Albania)."

<sup>5</sup> Flere, S., Hurrelmann, K., Klanjšek, R., Lavrič, M., Reimbold, H., "LOST IN DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION? Political Challenges and Perspectives for Young People in South East Europe Results of Representative Surveys in Eight Countries."

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Petkovic, S., "Recent Achievements and Current Challenges in Youth Policies in the Western Balkans (WB)."

<sup>9</sup> Petkovic, S., Rodic, M., "Policy and Legislative Framework for Youth Participation in the Balkans – Comparative Overview and Analysis."

high quality support measures for youth, especially on vulnerable groups of young people.<sup>10</sup> Collecting data on young people in each country from a political, economic and social aspect<sup>11</sup> can be an asset to sustainable and efficient policy measures in tackling youth issues. The decision makers' perception of youth is problematic. Youth are usually perceived as not experienced and as not having the necessary knowledge to deal with politics. Therefore, they are not consulted and their opinions are perceived as "nonprofessional" when it comes to drafting and implementing youth policies.<sup>12</sup> So, the youth are approached only as voters<sup>13</sup> and not partners in the political world. Local and national policies are seldom discussed, developed or implemented with and by the youth.

## Issue 3:

### Volunteering

Volunteering is unevenly developed across the region, but in general volunteering rates among youth are low. Across the countries of the Western Balkan, the level of volunteering of young people through CSOs was ranked low, which may imply that the CSO sector is underdeveloped in this aspect, with insufficient volunteering opportunities, and insufficient interest.<sup>14</sup> Another issue is the recognition of volunteering as experience, and frequent practice of not issuing certificates for their work.<sup>15</sup> Reasons for youth not partaking in youth organizations and for low youth participation/volunteering are: lack of information or lack of knowledge of existing youth groups people could join; lack of trust in youth organizations and the attitude that activities undertaken by youth organizations do not help the community.<sup>16</sup> Volunteering also comes hand in hand with civic education. Lack of civic education, lack of guidance in formal education on the importance of volunteering as a social engagement and the widespread understanding of volunteering and unpaid work as useless, all encourage negative attitudes of young people towards volunteering.<sup>17</sup> The lack of legislative framework in the countries of Western Balkans also illustrates the fact that volunteering activities are still not accepted. A law on volunteering exists in every country of the Western Balkans, but with the lack of proper implementation and many aspects of volunteering remaining unregulated. Lack of proper organized bodies to collect data on volunteers within the country and lack of a nationwide or regional wide platform for transparent and easy to find volunteering opportunities contributes to a weakened system in providing adequate protection, options and environment for youth to develop their skills.

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**10** Zeqo, Xh., Iliaz, Sh., Popovska, I., Gligorović, A., Soydinic, L., "Youth Participation Index 2017 – Monitoring Report on Political, Social and Economic Participation of Youth 2017. [https://www.divac.com/upload/document/ypi\\_2018\\_20181219\\_125330.pdf](https://www.divac.com/upload/document/ypi_2018_20181219_125330.pdf) Zeqo, Xh., Iliaz, Sh., Popovska, I., Gligorović, A., Soydinic, L. <https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json>

**11** From a political, economic and social aspect collecting data is referred to tracking how many young people are employed; are studying outside of the country or are working outside of the country; are involved in political parties; have official government positions; are actively involved in civic activism.

**12** Berisha, F., Shtraza, I., Hazizaj, A., "Pjesëmarrja e Të Rinjve Në Politikë Dhe Në Vendim-Marrje Në Shqipëri (Youth Participation in Politics, and Decision-Making in Albania)."

**13** Youth who are at a legal age of voting.

**14** Jusić, M., Numanović, A., "The Excluded Generation – Youth in Southeast Europe."

**15** Petkovic, S., Rodic, M, "Policy and Legislative Framework for Youth Participation in the Balkans – Comparative Overview and Analysis."

**16** Leshkoska, V., and other authors, "Citizens and Their Communities: Civic Engagement, Activism and Volunteering in the Republic of Macedonia."

**17** Knežević, M., Đukanović, P., "Youth – Social Ornament or Social Capital?"

## **Issue 4:**

### **Constructive Dialogue between the CSOs and Government**

The consultation of CSOs and other societal actors is, in general very limited, with political projects often pushed forward in a non-transparent way. Ruling political parties often monopolise public discourse, as CSOs, trade unions and other civil society actors do not have the professional capacities to reach an audience broad enough to influence discussions on certain topics in society.<sup>18</sup> The relationship between CSOs and governments remains underdeveloped and couples with the insufficient implementation of the mechanism and lack of political will to cooperate.<sup>19</sup> The political environment in the region of the Western Balkans lacks transparency and mainly runs behind closed doors excluding non-partisan and non-governmental actors, which, in turn contributes to sustaining a barrier between the government and non-government actors, and lowers the trust of both civil society and the general public in the government. Genuine CSOs' involvement and political commitment remain an issue in all countries of the region. Examples from all six countries show that CSO representatives have difficulties in getting their legislative and policy recommendations, as well as proposed good practices, adopted. Even if they are taken into consideration they rarely end up in the laws or strategies. In this regard, short deadlines in consultation procedures act against CSOs favour too.<sup>20</sup> There is also an underlying issue in the civil society sector in the Western Balkans, with CSOs lacking the requisite professional competencies or skills to interact effectively with partisan actors. Their campaigns consist mainly of awareness-raising through lectures and public performances, resulting in low levels of outreach and influence in societal and political processes, thus making them seem as unreliable and unprofessional to advocate their standpoints.<sup>21</sup>

## **Issue 5:**

### **Shrinking civic space**

Civic space<sup>22</sup>, as the environment in which CSOs act and operate, faces challenges too. There are some challenges with inadequate implementation of the laws and lack of implementing bylaws, as well as violations of the guaranteed freedoms (freedom of assembly, association and expression). A worrisome trend of rise of "civil" society organizations that propagate undemocratic values has been observed in Macedonia and Serbia, usually acting as proxies to political parties.<sup>23</sup> However not all CSOs act as proxies, since many are nonpartisan and work towards positive change. Despite legal protection, numerous cases of state interference in the internal matters of CSOs have been reported in almost all countries. Such interferences may include sanctions due to delays in declaration to the tax authorities, surveillance to prevent illegal activities, excessive administrative demands or illegitimate

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**18** Dautovic, M., Garkova, A., Korhonen, K., Ricken, S., Servantie, A., Szabo, D., Telschow, F., Wagner, R., Wölkner, S., "Building Bridges between Civil Society and Party Political Actors in the Western Balkans – The Perspective of Political Foundations."

**19** Neshikj, I., Spasovska, B., Stevkovski, D., "Fostering an Enabling Environment for Civil Society Contribution to Global Development, Balkan Ci."

**20** Neshikj, I., Spasovska, B., Stevkovski, D.

**21** Dautovic, M., Garkova, A., Korhonen, K., Ricken, S., Servantie, A., Szabo, D., Telschow, F., Wagner, R., Wölkner, S., "Building Bridges between Civil Society and Party Political Actors in the Western Balkans – The Perspective of Political Foundations."

**22** The civic space in itself encompasses a wide range of elements such as: freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, freedom to educate for and promote democratic values to name a few.

**23** Neshikj, I., Spasovska, B., Stevkovski, D., "Fostering an Enabling Environment for Civil Society Contribution to Global Development, Balkan Ci."

attacks.<sup>24</sup> Due to lack of understanding and lack of internal mechanisms and capacities, most CSOs apply very few feedback and accountability mechanisms, and they are mostly tied to their donors, rather than their direct beneficiaries and partners.<sup>25</sup> Cooperating and joining forces with as many organizations, formal and informal civic initiatives, is much more effective than just few organizations safeguarding the civic space on their own. Lessons from the region teach us that when civic space and democracy are under attack, showing bigger solidarity on international and global level might be a game-changer.<sup>26</sup> Freedom of expression in civil society represents the basic value in civic space, yet it is endangered especially in time of elections.<sup>27</sup>

## Issue 6:

### Financial sustainability and continuous access to funding

Financing for CSO activities is very scarce and only few have the capacities to develop project proposals in order to acquire funds through EU grants and other public or private sources. EU financial assistance tends to be granted only to those CSOs whose advocacy goals are in line with the current EU priorities as set out in their annual work programs or multi-annual strategies. However, this funding approach risks being counterproductive in terms of the sustainability of CSOs, as it forces them to change and realign their focus of activities for each project period.<sup>28</sup> Public funding in all countries is limited, distributed through non-transparent procedures and spent in an unaccountable manner. Kosovo and Serbia can be taken as examples of limited public funding. Despite the establishment of a working group for developing draft Regulation on public funding for CSOs, no special laws or policies regulate financial state support to Kosovar CSOs. In Serbia, without any prior notice, the Ministry of Finance changed the Rules on the method of determining and recording public funds beneficiaries and on the conditions and manner of opening and closing subaccounts with the Treasury Administration, re-establishing the obligation abolished in 2014 for opening such an account for CSOs.<sup>29</sup> Tax incentives, for instance, on private or corporate donations, grants and membership fees, interest from bank deposits etc., are in place, but tax treatment is still unfavourable and does not stimulate philanthropy.<sup>30</sup> In Macedonia for example, under the Law on Personal Income Tax and the Law on Profit Tax, CSOs are treated equally as for-profit entities and some regulations even put them in a less favourable position.<sup>31</sup> Donors funding models derive largely from their desire to easily evaluate their contributions, to immediately quantify success, to increase the visibility of the funding they provide, thus orienting their funds towards more short-term project support with immediate impacts, rather than long-term support development of civil society, harming the diversity of the sector and its further development.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Neshikj, I., Spasovska, B., Stevkovski, D.

<sup>25</sup> "What Can We Do to Promote Civic Space?"

<sup>26</sup> "What Can We Do to Promote Civic Space?"

<sup>27</sup> Antić, M., "The Trend of Shrinking Civic Space in Times of Elections."

<sup>28</sup> Dautovic, M., Garkova, A., Korhonen, K., Ricken, S., Servantie, A., Szabo, D., Telschow, F., Wagner, R., Wölkner, S., "Building Bridges between Civil Society and Party Political Actors in the Western Balkans – The Perspective of Political Foundations."

<sup>29</sup> Neshikj, I., Spasovska, B., Stevkovski, D., "Fostering an Enabling Environment for Civil Society Contribution to Global Development, Balkan Ci."

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> "What Can We Do to Promote Civic Space?"

## **Recommendations:**

To decision-makers in the Western Balkans:

1. To introduce civic education in the curricula in elementary, secondary and tertiary education, focusing on the development of students' abilities and skills to discuss and engage in social and civic activities, non-formal and informal education, volunteering, and training professors and trainers to deliver this knowledge.
2. To reform legal frameworks to facilitate and promote volunteering and internships, and enable inclusion of youth (through their representative bodies) to be consulted in law drafting and strategies.
3. To engage with CSOs in priority areas for the society in order to give a sustainable legal framework that will fulfil the interests and needs of citizens. The governments should ensure timely information to CSOs for their contribution in the initiatives.

**To the EU:**

1. To financially support a variety of CSO initiatives and to create a more diverse portfolio, a step which will contribute in realizing diverse initiatives towards reconciliation on a national and regional level, giving opportunity to a large number of CSOs to grow and develop.
2. To communicate the status of youth engagement the countries of the Western Balkans and explore opportunities for youth from the countries of the Western Balkans to promote their inclusion in EU programs and strategies.
3. To insist on inclusion of CSOs in legislative and policy processes and support countries in ensuring a well-established civic space.

**To member-states:**

1. To contribute to further assisting, financially and experience wise, the RYCO office in ensuring regional projects to continue taking place, so the office can better perform its mission to promote unity and reconciliation among youth.
2. To advocate transparent and inclusive formal gatherings in the region with representatives of CSOs to discuss the challenges of cooperation and inclusion. The major importance of this is that member states should have actual cooperation and meetings not only with official state representatives but also with other relevant actors.
3. To offer funds to support national CSOs engagement in public life through which youth will develop same capacities and values as the youth in EU, preparing them for the labour market.

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